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ABSTRACT

A national scope study was performed to test empirically the hypothesis that juveniles in adult jails have a suicide rate higher than that of juveniles in the general population. Random samples were drawn from all United States juvenile detention centers, all jails with an average daily population of at least 250 inmates, a 20 percent random sample of jails with average daily populations under 250, and a 6.8 percent random sample of adult lockups. Data were collected by mailed questionnaires, with an overall response rate of 77.4 percent. Statistically significant differences were found between the suicide rates of juveniles in adult jails during 1978 (12.3 per 100,000) and juveniles in the general population in 1977 (2.7 per 100,000); between juveniles in adult lockups (8.6 per 100,000) and juveniles in the general population; between juveniles in juvenile detention facilities (1.6 per 100,000) and juveniles in adult jails; and between juveniles in juvenile detention centers and juveniles in adult lockups. Results support the hypothesis that the rate of suicide among children held in adult jails and lockups is significantly higher than that among children in juvenile detention centers and children in the general population of the United States. (NRB)

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JUVENILE SUICIDES IN ADULT JAILS

Findings from a National Survey of
Juveniles in Secure Detention Facilities

Prepared for

The Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention

U.S. Department of Justice

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of jailing juveniles with adults has long been of concern to practitioners in the juvenile justice field. The physical and sexual abuse of youth in jails led to policies of separating youth from adult inmates. However, there is much anecdotal evidence that this separation of youth may increase the likelihood of juvenile suicide (Juvenile Justice Digest, 1979; Wooden, 1976; U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 1971.) This national scope study was performed to test empirically the widespread suspicion that juveniles in adult jails have a suicide rate higher than that of juveniles in the general population.

METHODOLOGY

The study's sample was drawn from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census "Criminal Justice Agency List," a compilation of all U.S. institutions involved in criminal justice. The sampling frame included 3,493 jails, 13,383 lockups, and 372 secure juvenile detention centers. It would have been impractical to attempt data collection from all 17,248 facilities in the sampling frame, therefore random samples were drawn from the larger strata. Specifically, these strata were:

- 1) All juvenile detention centers;
- 2) All jails with an average daily population of 250 inmates or more;
- 3) A twenty percent random sample of jails with an average daily population of less than 250 inmates;
- 4) A 6.8 percent random sample of lockups.

The responses from the last two strata were statistically weighted (as suggested by Kish, 1965) to achieve representativeness for the total sample. Data were collected from all strata by mailed questionnaires, and the study achieved by an overall response rate of 77.4 percent.

FINDINGS

The Number of Juveniles in Adult Jails and Lockups

There is great variation in the estimates of the annual number of children who are held in adult jails and lockups. Perhaps the highest projection is that

of Sarri (1974:5) who suggests that 500,000 juveniles are incarcerated in adult jails and lockups each year. In contrast, Poulin and his colleagues (1979:11) estimate that 120,000 children annually are held in jails only. Neither of these projections, however, is based on primary research. Rather, they are based on syntheses of secondary sources. Lowell and McNabb (1980:29) conducted a nationwide survey, and they project a one day count of 4,061 sentenced persons below the age of eighteen in jails. Unfortunately, apart from ignoring the many unsentenced juveniles in adult jails, their study had a response rate of only 51 percent, and they admit that their data seriously underestimate the parameter in large urban areas (Lowell and McNabb, 1980:27-8).

This study documented 383,328 children in secure juvenile detention centers during 1973. Given the response rate, the actual total is estimated to be approximately 392,662. The study documented 170,714 juveniles in adult jails. Again, given the response rate, the actual number is estimated to be 266,261. That yields an overall estimate of 479,908 persons below the age of eighteen who are held for any length of time in an adult jail or lockup during 1978. All of these projections are based upon linear extrapolation from the data.

The Incidence of Juvenile Suicide

Table 1 presents the suicide rates for children in adult jails, lockups, and juvenile detention centers during 1978, and the suicide rate among youth in the general population of the United States during 1977. Information on the general population from 1977 was used because final mortality data for 1978 had not, as yet, been computed by the National Center on Health Statistics (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979). The number of suicides among children in the general population during 1977 was obtained from the unpublished data at the Center for Health Statistics (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1980), and the number of children in the general population of the United States during 1977 is available in published form from the Bureau of Census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1980).

The rate of suicide among juveniles in adult jails during 1978 was 12.3 per 100,000 which is 4.6 times larger than the suicide rate of 2.7 per 100,000 among youth in the general population during 1977. From tabulated sums of Poisson probability values (Abramowitz and Stegun, 1965:979), we find that the difference between those two suicide rates is statistically significant with a $p = .00003$. The rate of suicide among juveniles in adult lockups is 8.6 per 100,000 which is more than three times larger than the rate of 2.7 among children in the general population, and that difference is also statistically significant with $p < .004$. Unexpectedly, the suicide rate among children in juvenile detention facilities is only 1.6 per 100,000, which is lower than that of the general population. Using a critical value of .05, this difference is not statistically significant with $p < .145$. The suicide rate of juveniles in adult jails is almost 7.7 times larger than that of juvenile detention centers, and that difference is statistically significant with

TABLE 1

SUICIDE RATES FOR CHILDREN IN ADULT JAILS, LOCKUPS,
AND JUVENILE DETENTION CENTERS DURING 1978, AND CHILDREN
IN THE GENERAL POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES DURING 1977

Population	Number of Children	Number of Suicides	Number of Suicides per 100,000 Children
Children in adult jails during 1978	170,714	21	12.3
Children in adult lock- ups during 1978	11,568	1	8.6
Children in juvenile detention centers during 1978	383,238	6	1.6
Children in the general population of the United States during 1977*	49,008,000	1313	2.7

*The number of children in the general population of the United States during 1977 represents all persons between the ages of 5 and 17, while data for children in adult jails, lockups and juvenile detention centers during 1978 represent persons below the age of 18.

$p < .005$. Similarly, the suicide rate among juveniles in adult lockups is more than five times larger than that of juvenile detention facilities, and that difference is also statistically significant with $p < .03$.

An Approximation to Longitudinal Design

All records of juvenile detention are either sealed or destroyed when the individual becomes an adult. This fact, coupled with the anticipated difficulty in completing our questionnaire, led to the use of a cross-sectional design when a longitudinal or time series design would have been preferable. In order to contextualize the 1978 data, suicide rates have been calculated for children in the general population of the United States from 1968 to 1977, and this information appears in Table 2. The relevant data were obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1980) and the Bureau of Census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1974, 1978b, 1980). Apart from statistical variation, there appears to be a trend toward an increasing rate of suicide among youth in the general population, and the 1977 figure of 2.7 per 100,000 is the highest value in Table 2. Yet, the suicide rates for juveniles in adult jails and lockups during 1978 are both considerably higher than that value, and statistically significant differences remain even if the value of 2.7 is arbitrarily raised to 4.0 per 100,000.

Discussion

There is support for the hypothesis that the rate of suicide among children held in adult jails and lockups is significantly higher than that among children in juvenile detention centers and children in the general population of the United States. However, the data do not indicate that the suicide rate among youth placed in juvenile detention facilities is greater than that of children in the general population. Several comments are pertinent to these observations. First, bear in mind that even the confidential admission of the occurrence of a juvenile suicide in an institutional setting is deeply embarrassing. To the extent that our data are characterized by response bias, such bias would, in all likelihood, contribute to an underestimate of the suicide rate in jails and lockups. Second, the data indicate that the average length of stay for children in jails is approximately seven days while the average length of stay in lockups is less than two days. In contrast, the average length of stay in juvenile detention facilities is seventeen days, and the suicide rate for children in the general population is calculated for an entire year or 365 days. In other words, children in adult jails and lockups kill themselves more frequently than do children in juvenile detention facilities and children in the general population, despite the fact that children in jails and lockups have less time in which to commit suicide. Third, one must also bear in mind that it is more difficult to commit suicide in jails and lockups than it is in the general population simply because the techniques at one's disposal

TABLE 2

SUICIDE RATES FOR CHILDREN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION
OF THE UNITED STATES FROM 1968 TO 1977*

Year	Number of Children	Suicides	Suicide Rate per 100,000
1977	49,008,000	1313	2.7
1976	49,851,000	1097	2.2
1975	50,368,000	1126	2.2
1974	50,949,000	1081	2.1
1973	51,480,000	1013	2.0
1972	52,012,000	950	1.8
1971	52,383,000	908	1.7
1970	52,545,000	806	1.5
1969	52,386,000	763	1.5
1968	51,976,000	668	1.3

*The term "children" refers to persons between 5 and 17 years old.

are much more limited. Together, these considerations imply that the problem of juvenile suicide in adult jails and lockups may well be even more serious than is suggested by the data per se. Fourth, the validity of the primary hypothesis is bolstered by the fact that seventeen of the suicides occurred despite the fact that in these cases sight and sound separation had been accomplished. Finally, the low rate of suicide among children in juvenile detention centers may be attributable to the greater supervision which is available at those facilities, and to the participation by juveniles in the ongoing youth activities at those facilities as opposed to the isolation which they would often confront in adult jails and lockups.

Policy Implications

These data suggest that the policy of incarcerating children in adult jails and lockups may be contributing to a relatively high rate of suicide among those children. Further, eleven of twenty-two children who killed themselves while in jails and lockups had not committed a felony, which implies that many of those juveniles who are imprisoned in jails pose little threat to their communities. These findings also indicate that the problem of juvenile suicide is no more acute in juvenile detention centers than it is in the general population.

As noted earlier, environmental and staffing limitations are common in adult jails and lockups. The effects of such living conditions worsen when isolation also occurs. This study has determined that the suicide rate for juveniles held in adult jails is about 4.6 times greater (12.3 per 100,000) than the suicide rate among youth in the general population (2.6 per 100,000). This high rate cannot be attributed to secure confinement alone since the suicide rate in separate juvenile detention facilities is well below that of the general youth population. Given this disparity in secure settings, it must be assumed that the high rate of juvenile suicides is attributable to the environmental and staffing conditions present in most adult jails and lockups.

The important point here is that nearly 500,000 juveniles experienced these detrimental conditions each year. If the physical and emotional well-being of juvenile offenders is to be a matter of concern, every effort must be made to prohibit the jailing of juveniles.

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